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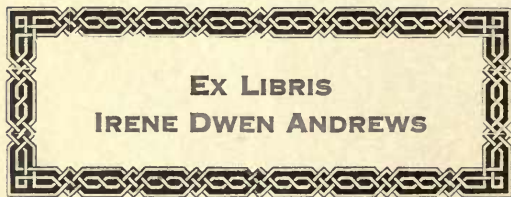
A COINCIDENCE IN ONE ACT

BY

BERNARD DUFFY

University of California
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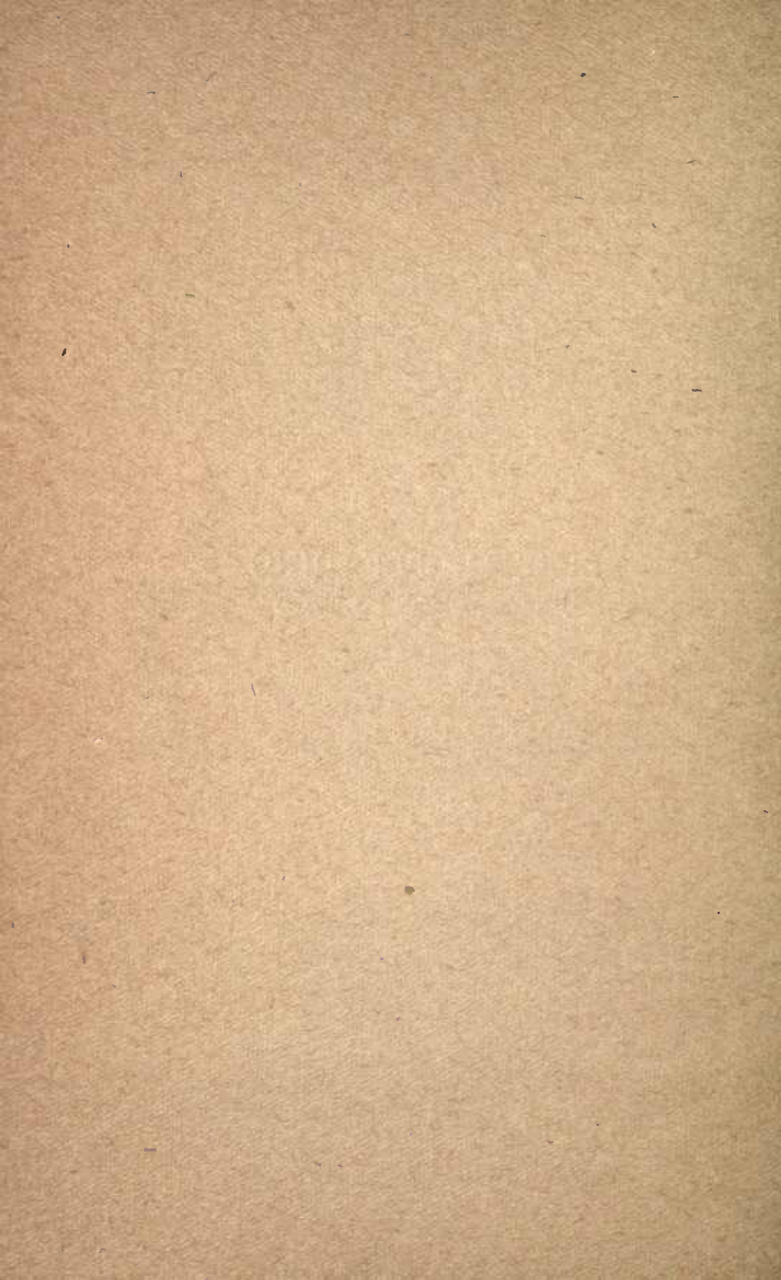
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TALBOT PRESS LIMITED
85 TALBOT STREET
1921



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SPECIAL PLEADING

▲ COINCIDENCE IN ONE ACT



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BERNARD DUFFY

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THE TALBOT PRESS LIMITED

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1921

CHARACTERS:

MICHAEL *An Irish Burglar*

JIM *A Cockney Burglar*

MR. CULVERT.

MARY.

Scene THE LIBRARY OF MR. CULVERT'S HOUSE

Time THE PRESENT DAY

Special Pleading

The scene is laid in the library of Mr. Culvert's house which is on the outskirts of a London suburb. The room is tastefully furnished. There are two armchairs in the middle of the stage facing the audience and a small closed Sheraton desk against the right hand wall, above which is a large portrait of a lady. A telephone stands on the desk. There is a door on the right and another on the left. Near the right hand one there is an electric-light switch, and at the back there is a large bow-window across which are drawn heavy curtains.

As the curtain goes up the stage is in darkness. The right-hand door is opened cautiously and Jim enters carrying a dark lantern. He is followed by Michael who carries a small hand-bag and an empty sack. Jim is a typical cockney with the ironical manner of his class. Michael is a Western Irishman of variable temperament, dreamy, enthusiastic, hot-tempered and humorous by turns. Both are poorly clad. Jim, flashing his lantern around, sees the electric light switch and turns it on.

Jim (looking about him). We may as well start 'ere.

Michael (indifferently). One place is as good as another to me. (*He sits down in an armchair and rests his chin on his hands.*)

Jim (gazing at him indignantly). 'Ere, wot d'ye think yer doin' may I awsk?

Michael. I'm just thinkin'.

Jim (caustically). If yer tike my advice you'll stop thinkin' an' get up on yer 'ind legs and start work. (*Michael ignores this remark and continues to gaze at nothing.*)

Michael (speaking dreamily). It did me heart good to get away from London this night—out into the country, with the moon shinin' an' the wind hardly whisperin' in the trees.

Jim (disgustedly). 'Ere, I sye, if you're goin' to talk poetry I'm off.

Michael (continuing). On a night like this in Ireland the fairies would be dancin' round the lone bushes, and playin' their music in the forts.

Jim. Fairies! Well, I'm blowed!

Michael (turning to him). You don't believe in fairies, I suppose?

Jim. Wot d'ye tike me for—a bloomin' kid?

Michael. Hardly that, James. But more than kids believes in fairies. I heard the fairy music, myself, one night an' me comin' home across the valley from a spree.

Jim. You 'ad too much whiskey that night.

Michael. No matter what I had, I heard the

music. It was in a fort on a hill and when I got to the top it was down in the hollow on t'other side. I tried to catch up with it, but if I was follyin' it till now, I could get no nearer to it. But I heard it, sure enough.

Jim. You 'ad a bit of a 'ead in the mornin' 'adn't you?

Michael. It wasn't that I tell ye. If it was, it made me hear sweeter music than ever I heard from the hand of man in me sober sines.

Jim. I think you bloomin' Hirish are all balmy.

Michael (annoyed). Arrah, what can one expect from the pig but the grunt! What could the likes of you know about fairies anyway? Sure, there's none of them in the East End of London—they wouldn't be seen in the same townland wid all them thimble-riggers, pickpockets an' thieves. I wouldn't meself either if I could help it—it's no place for a dacent man.

Jim (sarcastically). 'Specially when 'e's taken up burglin' as a perfession 'imself.

Michael (with a grin). Am dam but ye have me there, I forgot what we kem out for.

Jim. You're a nice burglar, I don't think.

Michael. Well, James, I wasn't brought up to the thrade, an' it's five years since I was in the country at night.

Jim. An' if we're copped to-night it'll be five more before we are in it again, night or day. 'ere we are wastin' time when we might be 'opped on any minute.

Michael (complacently). No fear of that. This house has been closed for some time; there's an eight-day clock in the hall, idle with cobwebs on it.

Jim (ironically). You ought to be a detective.

Michael (modestly). A man can't do everything at once, James.

Jim. No, but you can oblige a friend by doin' one thing and that's to start work.

(Michael rises and goes over to the desk).

Michael. Here's a desk, now, an' a rale purty article it is. How'll I open it?

Jim (opening the bag and passing him a "jemmy" from it). Prize it open with that.

Michael (toying with the jemmy). It's such a nice article I don't like to spoil it. *(He takes a bunch of rusty keys from his pocket).* I'll thry the keys. *(He tries one in the lock).* That one's too big. *(He tries another).* An' that one's too small, an'——

Jim (going to door on right). Hish! Listen! A copper, I'll bet.

Michael (after a pause). I only heard a dure. Maybe it's a ghost.

Jim (ironically). Yus, or a fairy. Hish! *(He listens again).* It's coming this wye.

Michael. What'll we do?

Jim (pointing to window). Quick, behind the curtains.

(Taking up the dark lamp and the bag he switches off the light and slips behind the curtains, closely followed by Michael. The right-hand door opens and Mary in a green opera cloak enters. She carries an electric torch, and when she reaches the middle of the room she clasps her hands and the light flashes into her face. She looks around as if seeking something, and, as her gaze rests on the left-hand door, she nods, and crossing to it turns the handle and passes into the other room, closing the door behind her. Jim, with his lantern in his hand, comes out quietly and turns the key in the lock. Michael pops his head out from behind the curtain).

Michael (in an awestruck whisper). Did ye see her?

Jim. I should sye so. Bit of orl right, eh?

Michael. She was a ghost.

Jim. I don't think.

Michael. Well, if she wasn't a ghost she was a fairy. Didn't ye notice that she made no noise an' her walkin' across the flure, an' didn't ye see the way her face lighted up when she waved the wand she was carryin' in her hand?

Jim. Talk sense. That's the daughter of the 'ouse comin' 'ome from a dawnce.

Michael. Daughter, yer granny, comin' to an empty house with no sign of life in it.

Jim. Mayn't one 'ad time to set it right since they come back. She's probably gone to 'er bedroom that wye. In any case I've got her locked in.

Michael. I'll bet you fourpence that——

Jim. You ain't got fourpence.

Michael. Well, I'll bet you the first fourpence I get that if you open that dure ye'll not find her there.

Jim. I'll tike no bets an' I'll take no risks. Best thing we can do is to 'ook it in case she thinks of comin' back this wye.

Michael (persuasively). It's very lucky if ye catch a fairy.

Jim. But it ain't lucky if the fairy cops you. So we'll clear out. Come on, you silly idiot.

(They are moving towards the right-hand door when something startles them).

Jim. It's a copper this time, sure as shootin'.

(They listen).

Michael. Aisy a bit. That's not loud enough for the footstep of a bobby. Listen!

(They listen again, and then suddenly make a rush for the window and hide behind the curtains. They are barely

hidden when the right-hand door opens and Mr. Culvert, a stern-looking old gentleman, enters and switches on the light. He looks around the room).

Mr. Culvert. H'm! I could have sworn that I heard a noise here. *(He sniffs the air).* Remarkably stuffy atmosphere.

(He goes to the window and draws back the curtains, revealing Michael and Jim standing to attention. He stares at them for a moment in astonishment. Michael's face breaks into an affable grin and he steps out into the room. Jim follows).

Michael. Fine night, sir.

Mr. C. Well, 'pon my word, you're a cool customer.

Michael. Can't help that, sir; there's a touch of frost in the air.

Mr. C. What were you doing behind those curtains?

Michael. To tell the truth we wor hidin' from you.

Mr. C. I guessed that much. But what brings you here?

Michael. Would you be surprised, now if I told you we wor policemen in Christian's clothes?

Mr. C. I certainly shouldn't believe it.

Michael (grinning). Ye'd be right: we're not.

Jim. It's loike this, sir. Trade bein' a bit slack——

Mr. C. Burgling is your trade, I presume.

Michael (somewhat indignantly). It is not, then. I'm a gardener be trade, and Jim is a handy man be profession. Aren't ye, Jim?

Jim. I should sye so.

Michael. Ye see, it's like this: Jim's sister is a kind of a widda!——

Mr. C. (puzzled). A kind of a widow!

Michael. Yes, a grass widda, an' she has four grass orphans. Ye see Jim's brother-in-law was after visitin' a few houses in the West End and now he's staying at a big place in Holloway.

Jim. Wot 'e means is that 'e's in jile.

Mr. C. Oh, in jail, is he?

Michael. Yes, an' his wife an' childer is, ye might say, starvin'. Me and Jim was purty hard up ourselves, so there was nothin' for it but to take up Bill's trade. So we tuk his kit of tools and kem along here. (*He indicates the bag in Jim's hand*).

Mr. C. (regarding the tools in the open bag with some curiosity). Are those they?

Michael. Them's them. An' that's the whole story.

Mr. C. I must say it sounds highly improbable.

Michael (scratching his head ruefully). Aye, doesn't it! But it's true all the same.

Mr. C. (to *Michael*). You are Irish, I think?

Michael (proudly). I am to the backbone. (Truculently). Is there anything wrong in that?

Mr. C. On the contrary I have rather a liking for Ireland. My father was an Irish landlord and I was born there.

Michael. Born there, wor ye! (*He rubs his chin with his hand*). Bedad, if I'd known that we'd never have touched your house—though, mind you, the landlords of Ireland was no friends to the likes of me.

Mr. C. (coldly). We will not discuss politics. The question is what what am I to do with the pair of you?

Jim. Let's off this time, guvnor. We ain't done you no 'arm. We were only just startin' on that desk when the young lidy come in.

Mr. C. (in surprise). The young lady! What young lady?

Jim. I thought she must be the young lidy of the 'ouse.

Mr. C. There is no lady, young or old, here. The house has been closed for some time, and I came back to-night without notice to my servants.

Michael (triumphantly). There y'are now! What did I say?

Jim (impatiently). Oh, chuck it, Mike.

Mr. C. Wait a moment. What did he say?

Jim. 'e said she must be a ghost or a fairy.

Michael. Didn't she come into the room, and pass through that dure (*pointing to door on left*) without a sound the same as if she was a ghost?

Mr. C. If she passed through that door, we can soon settle the matter. There is no way out of that room except by the window, and that would entail a twenty-foot drop.

Michael. Nothing to the likes of her.

Mr. C. We'll see.

(*Mr. C. goes to door on left and, unlocking it, throws it open. He peers in.*)

Mr. C. There certainly is someone hiding there. (*Speaking into the room*). Come out into the light, madame, and let us see your face.

(*Mary comes out with hanging head, looking very shamefaced.*)

Mr. C. And now, madame, pray who are you?

Mary (nervously). I — I — I — am your daughter-in-law.

Mr. C. (astonished). My what?

Mary. I am Harry's wife.

Mr. C. (frigidly). Indeed! And what, may I ask, brings you uninvited to my house in the small hours of the morning.

Mary (faltering). I—I—I'll explain.

Mr. C. (grimly). It will need some explanation.

Mary. I—I—that is we—I mean something had to be done. Harry is ill—he has been ill for some time—and we are very poor—he has had no briefs lately—and he needs nourishment and we couldn't afford to pay for it.

Mr. C. And so you decided to come and beg from me.

Mary. We did not: we'd sooner die than beg from you or anyone else.

Mr. C. Then why are you here?

Mary. I was on my way home from a concert at which I was singing—I earn a little that way.

Mr. C. A fine occupation for a barrister's wife.

Mary (indignantly). I wasn't going to stand idle as long as I could do something towards providing what was necessary.

Michael. Hear, hear!

(Mr. C. gives him a sour look).

Mr. C. (to Mary). You haven't yet explained your presence here.

Mary. Harry knew that I'd pass this house on my way home. He had seen in the newspapers that you were abroad and he gave me the latchkey he had when he was here, so that

I might get some old coins from a cabinet in the next room. He told me the lie of the house.

Mr. C. So you are worse than a beggar. You are just a common burglar like these two. (*He points to Michael and Jim*).

Michael. He says she's like us, Jim!

Jim. Wot, ho!

Mr. C. (rubbing it in). A common burglar, sneaking into my house to steal my property.

Mary (bravely). They're not your property. They're Harry's. He collected them and you have no right to them. He—he is very ill—and—there was nothing else we could think of.

Mr. C. I am not surprised to hear that Mr. Harry is beginning to realize that he would have been better off if he had not gone against my wishes.

Mary. He has done nothing he regrets.

Mr. C. He married you.

Michael (breaking in). An' man dear, surely ye don't think he regrets that?

Mr. C. (to Michael). Silence, sir! (*To Mary*). He married you against my wishes.

Michael. An' small blame to him. (*To Mary*). I'd marry you meself Miss, though I'm be nature a bachelor.

Mary (to Mr. C.). But why are you so angry with him for marrying me?

Mr. C. Your father was my greatest enemy.

Mary. I have heard all about that silly

quarrel. But I had nothing to do with it. I am not your enemy.

Michael (to Mr. C.). There now, what have you to say to that?

Jim (in a whisper). 'Ere, Mike, don't you put in your cutty; we're in a bad enough 'ole without gettin' 'is rag out.

Michael. I may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. (*To Mr. C.*). I am askin' ye what have ye to say to what the young lady sez! She never did anything on ye.

Mary. Indeed I did not.

Mr. C. You are your father's daughter, and that is enough.

Michael. Listen to me, me dacent man. Maybe if you wor blamed for all your father did you wouldn't be so high an' mighty. If it comes to that, your father was one of my greatest enemies.

Mr. C. (in surprise). One of *your* greatest enemies!

Michael. Aye, just. The landlords of Ireland was the greatest enemies the peasants had. I'm a peasant an' your father was a landlord, an' being so he was one of my greatest enemies. But do I bear you any ill will on that account? Divil a bit.

Mr. C. (ironically). You are very kind.

Michael. Don't mention it. Now what I say is this, if your son never did anything worse

than marryin' the purty little cratur here, he hasn't much to answer for. He married for love, didn't he?

Mary. Oh, indeed he did, for I had nothing else to give him.

Michael. An' what's wrong with that? Isn't it what any man'd do? Wouldn't you do it, Jim?

Jim. Don't drag me in—I ain't blaming nobody.

Michael (to Mary). But maybe, Miss—ma'am—he didn't marry for love himself. (*He indicates Mr. C.*)

Mary. I'm sure he did, for Harry often speaks to me of his mother, and from what he tells me no one could help loving her. (*She points to the picture over the desk.*) That's her picture.

(*Michael goes over and looks up at the picture.*)

Michael. So that's her picture. It was herself that had the nice kind face.

Mary. She was as kind and good as she looks.

Michael. Well, well. He married the woman he wanted an' now he casts out her son because he does the same.

Mary. Isn't it absurd?

Michael. Absurd's not the name for it, ma'am. But that's the way always when ould

people forget that they were young once themselves.

Mr. C. (coldly to Mary). Madame, when you are finished discussing my character with this—ah—friend of yours, you will kindly return to your husband, and tell him——

Michael (breaking in). Tell him that his father is cuttin' his nose off to spite his face livin' in a big house with not one in it that cares tuppence for him, when he might have yourself, ma'am, and your husband to keep him company in the latter end of his days.

Mr. C. (with asperity). Will you kindly keep your tongue quiet?

Michael. I will not, till I tell you the truth about yeself. There y'are now a lonely man, when you might have your gran'childer—(*To Mary*). Have ye any childer, ma'am?

Mary. A boy and a girl—the sweetest darlings.

Michael (gallantly). Like their mother! (*To Mr. C.*) As I was sayin', ye might be as happy as the day is long with yer gran'childer playin' about your knees. Just think, now, of the difference it would make in this ould house to hear them childer laughin' in it.

(*Mr. C. begins to walk up and down at the back of the stage sunk in thought with his hands behind his back*).

Jim. Easy, Mike, maybe the old gent don't like noise.

Michael. Arrah, sure a child's laugh is not noise—it's music.

Jim (dubiously). They're not always laughin'.

Michael (in a fierce whisper). If you don't keep your mouth shut I'll put you from laughin' for a month of Sundays.

(Mr. C. stops walking, and stands for a moment looking up at the portrait. Michael catches him in the act).

Michael. An' what would she say, I wonder *(he points to the portrait)* if she could come back an' see her son lyin' on his sick bed, and his father not puttin' one finger before t'other to help him.

(While Michael is speaking, Mr. C. turns towards him with a far-away look in his eyes. He glances again at the portrait and then rests his chin on his hand. They all watch him in silence. Suddenly he goes over to the telephone, turns the handle and places the receiver to his ear).

Jim (sotto voice to Michael). Naw, then, you've been an' gone an' done it. 'E's goin' to call up the police stytion.

Michael (defiantly). Let him call away.

Mr. C. (to the telephone). 5761x, please. (Silence for a moment).

Mr. C. Hello! Is that Carton's? Will you please send a taxi at once to "Tenterden," Onlney Road? Thanks.

(He replaces the receiver and turns to Mary).

Mr. C. I have ordered a taxi to take you home.

Mary. Thank you.

Mr. C. (to Jim and Michael). And now, what am I to do with you?

Jim. Don't call in the cops, guv'nor. We'll never trouble you again. Don't mind what 'e said (he indicates Michael). 'E's a hot-headed beggar an' 'e didn't mean 'alf of it.

Michael (fiercely). I'm not hot-heated, ye pup, an' I meant every word I said. I couldn't stand by and see this purty cratur browbeat an' say nothin'.

Mary. Indeed you were very kind, and if Harry were here he'd thank you too, for pleading so well for us.

Michael. He might be pleadin' for us one of these days; ye see we're kind of burglars.

Mary. Burglars! I don't believe you'd steal anything.

Michael. Well, we didn't, because we didn't get time.

Jim (gloomily). Strikes me we'll get time for this job later on.

Mr. C. (to Michael). I think you said you were a gardener?

Michael. Yes, that's what I am, and Jim's a handy man.

Mr. C. I wish to test the truth of your statement, and I expect both of you to start work on the grounds of this house in the morning. (*They are dumbfounded with astonishment. A motor horn is heard outside.*)

Mr. C. (to Mary). There's your taxi now. You had better return to your husband.

Mary. May I take the coins with me?

Mr. C. (shaking his head). No.

Michael (hotly). An' dam but you're a hard-hearted unnatural ould divil. Ye needn't expect me to come to yer rotten ould garden.

Jim (disgustedly). That's what I call awskin' for it.

Mr. C. (to Michael). So you won't come?

Michael (decisively). No! I wouldn't work for the likes of you.

Mr. C. I suppose you'd work for this lady (*Points to Mary*) if she were mistress here.

Michael. I would—the nails off me fingers.

Mr. C. (smiling). Then you had better reconsider your decision.

(*He puts his hand on Mary's shoulder. She looks up at him in surprise.*)

Michael. I beg your pardon, sir, for misjudging you. I've made a fool of myself.

Mr. C. No, but you've made a wise man of me. (*To Mary*). Come, my dear, we will go together to Harry.

CURTAIN.

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